

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506~~SECRET~~

URGENT ACTION

January 7, 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM:

Phil Odeen *PO*

SUBJECT:

The Situation in Vietnam's MR-2

In view of the threatening situation in the MR-2 Highlands, we took advantage of John Vann's presence in Washington to try to better understand the problems and determine what action is needed to reduce the risks of a major military or psychological defeat in the coming months.

As you know, Vann is a 10-year Vietnam veteran and is the chief U.S. adviser in MR-2. He was previously the pacification chief in MR-3 and MR-4.

The Near - Term Threat

Vann agrees with the CIA assessment -- the Central Highlands will be the primary focus of VC/NVA activity in Vietnam over the next two months. Infiltration to this area is up sharply and the 320th NVA division is almost certainly enroute to the area.

Vann is convinced that the target of the NVA effort will be Kontum City and the town of Tan Can; the NVA is already preparing the battlefield in this area as well as others. The timing will be just before or after Tet (Feb 15) with Vann putting greater weight on the later date. Vann believes a primary objective will be to create a psychological impact prior to the President's arrival in China while carrying on the strategy, enunciated by COSVN 9, of pressuring ARVN out of the highlands.

Militarily, Vann welcomes the assault as he believes it can be handled and the NVA will take heavy casualties and consume scarce supplies. The end result will be to reduce enemy pressure in other parts of the area. However, Vann agrees that the U.S. press may well portray the attack as evidence of the failure of Vietnamization. Kontum City may suffer damage and portions might temporarily fall into NVA hands. Militarily the impact would be minor, but the headline value could be great.

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Vann thought all necessary actions were underway in Vietnam to prepare for the attack. Reinforcements were available and airlift and air support assets were adequate. The only further step that should be taken is to get a new commander for the Vietnamese 22nd Division, the unit that will get the brunt of the attack. As you may recall, Laird's recent report on RVNAF Improvement and Modernization noted that there are now only two unqualified ARVN division commanders. Both are in MR-2.

Vann said he and the Vietnamese MR commander, General Dzu, had repeatedly urged that General Trien, the 22nd Division Commander, be replaced. Trien is a hopeless defeatist and his presence could lead to a major defeat for the ARVN. Given the slightest excuse Trien will try to withdraw from the major outposts, leaving them to the NVA. In turn, Vann believes that no real disruption would be occasioned by Trien's removal and it would have an immediate effect on the 22nd's combat capabilities. I believe the situation may well warrant intervention on your part, and a backchannel message to Bunker is enclosed (Tab A) urging that, if he and Abrams agree, he press Thieu to replace Trien immediately. I recommend signature. John Negroponte concurs.

Other Interesting Points

Vann made a number of other interesting points, which are summarized briefly below. Relevant points will be incorporated in the VSSG assessment and action paper we are preparing.

Strategy in MR-2

Vann is following a population-oriented strategy in MR-2. Full control over the bulk of the people is preferred even if it means loss of control over some lightly populated portions of the region. Friendly forces are concentrated along the coast. The ranger camps on the Cambodian border are merely to fly the flag and avoid giving the enemy the political advantage of full control over a big area on maps.

Vann expects to make significant pacification progress over the next year because 90 percent of the population in MR-2 is on 8 percent of the area. Thus far, he has held the control indicators steady at 55 percent, a better performance than MR-1 where control has dropped.

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The ARVN does not want to move against the enemy in isolated jungle areas and the troops fight badly on such operations. Thus, Vann's strategy is to let the enemy attack the prepared defensive positions in the Highlands. When defending their bases, the ARVN fights well. Vann argues that giving up territory merely makes the enemies' supply lines longer.

VC/NVA Capability

Vann notes a real drop in the ability of the VC/NVA to carry out ambitious plans for attacks and high points. He estimated that they now carry out 20% or less of the military actions they are ordered to undertake. This factor should be considered when reading their often ambitious campaign plans.

Vietnamese Air Force

Vann has serious reservation about the VNAF, in part the result of U.S. interservice rivalries. His criticisms were:

-- The U.S. Air Force knows almost nothing about how to use helicopters tactically. The Army has years of experience, but are precluded from advising the VNAF, since it is an Air Force responsibility.

-- VNAF fixed wing pilots are ill-trained. They have limited close air support training, since the U.S. has always performed that role for the ARVN.

-- The helicopter mix is wrong. The VNAF has no light observation helicopters (LOHs) even though they are much cheaper to buy and maintain, only take one pilot, and can perform a large number of missions the VNAF must use UH-1s for. He urges that the VNAF helicopter force be expanded beyond the 500 level though the substitution of LOHs for the UH-1. This seems like a good idea.

U.S. Residual Forces

A small U.S. residual force of 30,000 or so would be fully adequate, if properly structured. His primary concern was that we provide sufficient helicopters in the residual force. He also urged that we

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keep at least one adviser in each district and with each ARVN regiment. He warned of the tendency to cut out the field advisers while retaining large headquarters staffs at the MR and Saigon levels.

In order to attract good U.S. advisers, he urges that families be permitted to return to Vietnam. They would not be allowed in all areas, but he felt the situation was ripe for families to be in the major cities.

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Jan. 12

Secretariat:

Hak has seen an LDX'd copy of the
attached. I ~~to~~ checked with the
Sit Room and they said the backchannel
message to Bunker was sent last night.
Louise

BACK CHANNEL

KISSINGER TO BUNKER

We are growing increasingly concerned over the situation in MR-2. Intelligence available here indicates a major attack in the Highlands sometime in the next few weeks. I know you appreciate the distorted coverage the U.S. press may tend to give to any ARVN set-backs as a defeat of Vietnamization. There has, of course, also been speculation that timing of anticipated high-points may in part be geared to President's forthcoming visit to China.

We have fullest confidence in ARVN capacity to deal with any threat which may materialize and know that General Abrams is doing whatever may be necessary to assist them. I would, however, like to address one specific problem which causes us some concern, namely the quality of ARVN leadership in MR - II.

Secretary Laird's recent trip and his latest report on the RVNAF improvement program stressed the critical importance of good leadership. He pointed out that the two ARVN divisions in MR-II are the only remaining cases of unacceptable division commanders. You and General Abrams are obviously in the best position to judge whether this remains the case and, if so, the timing and extent of any leverage we might wish to exert on Thieu to rectify the situation.

I would only comment that since the only severe threat which appears to be developing at this time in SVN is on the B-3 front, it is clearly in

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everyone's interest to have the best possible ARVN commander in the Highlands. Command of the ARVN 22nd division will be especially critical and you and Abrams may therefore wish to consider consulting urgently with Thieu to see if anything can be done to replace promptly the present commander with a more vigorous and highly regarded leader.

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